

The impact of unproven allegations on foster carers



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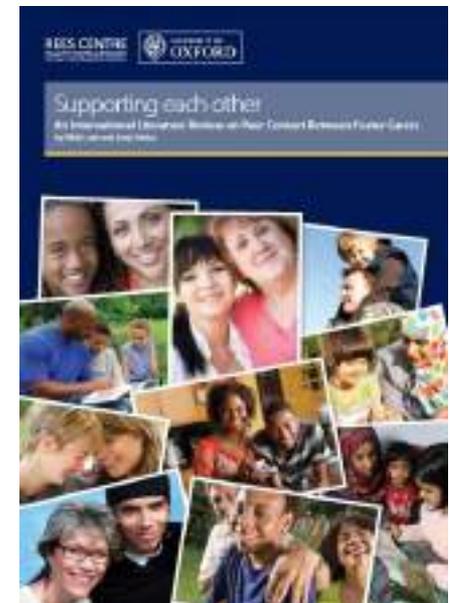
The Rees Centre aims to:

- identify what works to improve the outcomes and life chances of children and young people in foster care.

We are doing this by:

- reviewing existing research in order to make better use of current evidence.
- conducting new research to address gaps.
- working with service users to identify research priorities and translate research messages into practice.
- employing foster carers and care experienced young people as co-researchers.

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Background

- 44,625 fostering households in England.
2,420 allegations (58% physical, 19% emotional, 15% neglect 8% sexual abuse) over 12 months.
- National Minimum Standards for Fostering sets out how foster carers should be treated and supported during investigations into allegations including provision of independent support, information & advice about the process & emotional support.
- Biehal et al. (2014, NSPCC) looked at impact on children of substantiated cases – highlighted need for further research.
- Pilot study commissioned by FosterTalk illustrated the devastating impact of unproven allegations on carers and their families – financial, emotional, health, etc.

Aims of the study

Aims were to:

- Identify any characteristics of young people more likely to make allegations and the characteristics of foster carers more likely to be involved.
- Explore the impact of unproven allegations on carers to improve the way allegations are dealt with by fostering services, local authorities and the police.
- Inform future training and support for foster carers.

Methodology

Phase 1: Fostering providers were asked to draw on their records of unproven cases during the calendar years 2013 and 2014 to provide information on the characteristics of the children and carers involved in allegations, their placements, experience, training and support.

Phase 2: In-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 30 foster carers, 23 Supervising Social Workers (SSW) and 13 fostering managers who were involved in these same cases.

The interviews explored specific training offered, response to the allegation incident, support offered, outcome, pay, emotional and practical implications.

Summary of the Data Collection

Data collected	Local authorities	Independent fostering providers(IFPs)	Total
Phase 1			
Data from unproven cases	92 from 10 LAs	98 from 9 IFPs	190
Phase 2			
Interviews with foster carers	16 from 8 LAs	14 from 8 IFPs	30
Interviews with social workers	14 from 8 LAs	9 from 8 IFPs	23
Interviews with fostering managers	5 from 5 LAs	8 from 8 IFPs	13

Characteristics of the Sample

- 55% of foster carers had fostered for less than five years.
- 59% of the children had been in placement less than one year.
- 48% of children were in their first placement.
- 25% of those who had had a previous placement were known to have made an allegation before.
- Might belie the idea that many children have learnt to 'play the system' using an allegation to prompt a move of placement?

Key Findings

- Around 85% continued fostering.
- 55% of carers were offered support on the day they were told, 40% of carers were not offered independent support.
- 23% of carers reported to have attended any training that was specifically about allegations, only 3 of these resigned.
- No differences between those fostering for LAs and those fostering for IFPs except:
 - LA more likely to continue payments;
 - IFP more likely to offer wider agency support and face-to-face independent support.

Independent support

I recommend to everyone that they have them [Independent support] even if they don't think they need them ... You go in meetings and you think, did they say this, did they say that, well, she knows because she's writing it down. She's not emotional, she's detached from it, so she gets the facts right, the facts down and then you've got them then which is good, it really is good
Foster Carer IFP

Main Impacts

- Main impact on carers was emotional and financial - upset by the allegation itself but equally by the ensuing treatment.
- Lack of information about the allegation itself, the investigation process and the support to which they were entitled led to confusion, destruction of confidence and dismay.
- Direct and indirect impacts on children in the carer's family.
- Carers' subsequent relationships with fostered children and with the fostering provider suffered.

Impact on carers

It's hell on Earth it really is. We thought everyone was looking at us... we thought everybody knew what she had said about us. It was a very harrowing, very harrowing experience. Foster carer IFP

... you're guilty until proven innocent. And I kept saying if we'd gone into a court of law you're innocent till proven guilty, but this is the other way round,... everybody treats you as you're guilty and you've got to prove yourself innocent... which then took sort of like 7 months ...or 9 months to do. Foster carer LA

So we'd gone 100% into looking after these kids and then we had no kids, no money, nothing, no retainer, no nothing then. It just discourages you from giving 100% commitment when there's no backup for us. Foster carer IFP

Getting the timing right

- Social workers felt they had given written and verbal information about the investigation immediately following the allegation, but many carers did not remember this.
- Carers stressed that expecting them to look in their handbook at such times is fruitless, and that being told not to worry is not helpful.

Someone telling you what's going on, "but don't worry". You sit here for five weeks and "don't worry". Have the police have a chat with you, "no don't worry about it"... I said, please don't tell me not to worry, because I'm ready to explode. That's horrible, it's quite patronising.

Foster Carer LA

National Minimum Standards state that investigations into allegations should be treated separately from procedures reviewing poor standards of care.

- No universal understanding of 'allegation'.
- Different LAs and sometimes individuals within one LA, had different thresholds in terms of defining allegations.
- Issues raised often included both allegations and concerns or standard of care issues.
- Poor recording or reporting often reduced clarity and had implications for the investigation.

But it wasn't all bad....

The impact on the family was that they have grown stronger. They've tended to embrace fostering more as a family, rather than it just be [main carer]

Social Worker LA

She stepped in and sort of took everything over and it was all sorted out you know, so yeah I mean I suppose if it wasn't for her I'd look at it as would I still be fostering? Foster carer IFP

Recommendations for Department for Education, Association of Directors of Children's Services, Ofsted

- A clearer definition of 'allegation' is needed that is consistent within and between fostering providers and explicitly distinct from Standards of Care concerns.
- The DfE should issue guidance on 'Protecting Children and Supporting Foster Carers during Allegations' emphasising the need to provide training and independent support.
- Training for foster carers specifically on allegations should be mandatory within 6 months of approval & refreshed annually.
- Ofsted should monitor more closely the extent to which the Minimum Standards for Fostering are being met with respect to foster carers being offered independent support and effective training.

Recommendations for Fostering Providers

- Fostering providers should ensure that foster carers complete high quality initial training within six months of approval and regular updates that directly address:
 - the situations likely to lead to allegations;
 - the procedure when allegations occur;
 - support for addressing the impact of allegations.
- Fostering providers should offer foster carers independent support services including face-to-face support.

Recommendations for Social Workers

- SWs need to provide information about the procedure immediately that an allegation is made and repeat this later.
- SWs should check regularly what information carers can be given following an allegation so that they are not kept in the dark any longer than necessary.
- SWs should discuss with the carer what support if any is needed for children in the carers' family.
- SWs should give the carer and their extended family an opportunity to 'vent' their frustration and helplessness.

How you can be involved

- Express interest in being involved in future possible research projects;
- Come along to lectures & seminars and log into webinars;
- Join our mailing list and receive newsletters 5 times/year rees.centre@education.ox.ac.uk;
- Web - <http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/>;
- Comment on our blog – or write for us;
- Follow us on Twitter - @reescentre and Facebook